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The Charter of Quebec Values: A View from Cultural Psychiatry

The current proposal by the Parti Québécois for a Charter of Quebec Values raises key questions about the direction of our society. We write here as mental health practitioners, researchers, and educators directly involved in issues of cultural diversity in mental health and health care services.

Although respect for human rights is the most basic reason for rejecting the Charter of Quebec Values, we are deeply concerned about its negative effects on mental health, well-being and social integration. We believe the proposals are profoundly misguided for many reasons.

Neutrality as a Veil for Discrimination

Under the banner of secularism and neutrality, the proposed Charter launches an attack on minorities and on the very idea of diversity in society. Neutrality — in the sense of equity, fairness, openness and even-handed recognition — does not depend on ignoring difference or insisting that individuals hide their identities. On the contrary, it means recognizing people for who they are and insuring they have the same opportunities as others regardless of their identity.

Tolerance, mutual understanding and respect come from dialogue with others. Public displays of religious affiliation are affirmations of personal and communal identities and values from which we all can learn. Excluding personal expressions of culture, religion, and spirituality by employees working in public institutions will prevent people from learning about each other and will lead to more stereotyping, discrimination and social exclusion. The Charter will thus undermine efforts to build a tolerant and inclusive society and will increase ethnic conflict both at home and abroad. It is a major step backward in the effort to build a pluralistic society committed to human rights.

The Politics of Division: Making a Religion of Secularism

The thinking behind the Charter is a throwback to an earlier time when racism, anti-Semitism and discrimination against minorities were features of everyday life in Quebec—as they also were elsewhere in Canada. Both Anglophone and Francophone institutions participated in this intolerance. Indeed, the Jewish General Hospital was built in the 1930s because of systematic discrimination at major academic and health care institutions in Montreal.

In the last 50 years, we have made real strides in moving beyond this history of discrimination in public institutions, including schools, hospitals, social services, police and the courts. Now, the Charter proposal is sowing the seeds of dissension by proposing a policy that violates fundamental human rights and creates an environment openly hostile to minorities. The current effort to limit religious freedoms has capitalized on global anxieties about the “Other”—usually framed as someone from Muslim or other non-Christian background. This political manipulation of fear and mistrust has already had a negative impact on the security and well-being of many minorities as well as the population as a whole.

Confronted with the obvious irony of exempting the large Christian crosses in the legislature, on Mont Royal, and on the Quebec flag, advocates insist these are essential parts of Quebec's historical patrimony—and not strictly religious. This view fails to comprehend the meaning and message of these symbols to those who are not Christian. These exemptions also perpetrate a very selective view of history that ignores the centrality of First Nations peoples and the contributions of many other immigrant groups. Aboriginal peoples had their traditions undermined and suppressed by government policies and have struggled long and hard to regain and revitalize their own spirituality. Indeed, honouring their history and traditions with prominent symbols in public institutions would be an important acknowledgement of our collective history.

The citizens of Quebec come from many different backgrounds. Many minority groups have been here for generations and rightfully expect to have their values and traditions fully represented and respected in mainstream public institutions. For some, religion or spirituality are key aspects of what constitutes them as individuals and as a community. Other newcomers have come here fleeing persecution in their countries of origin. All have chosen Quebec because they see it as a society that is committed to values of equality and mutual respect. Honouring these values requires not just toleration of others but active recognition and engagement with diversity.

Diversity is Good for Your Health

Recognition of cultural identity is important for the mental health and well-being of individuals and communities. Language, religion, ethnicity and other aspects of cultural background are sources of strength, resilience and belonging. There is evidence that many of those who practice religion or other spiritual or moral traditions have better mental health, perhaps because they enjoy a supportive community, and a worldview that provides meaning and value to their lives. The positive effects of identity also come from recognition and respect by others. To promote mental health, therefore, we need to actively engage others in ways that respect their backgrounds.

We all seek a balance between the comfort and familiarity of sameness and the liveliness and stimulation of diversity. Those who live in an urban setting like Montreal become comfortable with diversity and tend to see it as a source of strength and creativity. People who live in settings where they have little exposure to diversity may find it challenging or even threatening. Rather than exploiting the prejudice and stereotypes that come from lack of familiarity, then, we need more education and exposure to diversity to promote mutual understanding and acceptance.

Pluralism, Multiculturalism and Civil Society

Premier Marois has made some misleading statements about the negative effects of multiculturalism in the UK and has implied that French republicanism avoids these pitfalls. In fact, these claims have little basis in reality. The UK is not rife with ethnic conflict and France certainly is not free of it. Many have critiqued the way that the French ideology of republicanism has worked to marginalize, silence and exclude minorities.

In reality, it is Canada—and Quebec—that have been positive examples of successful pluralism, advancing the ideal of creating societies inclusive of diversity. Multiculturalism, which the Quebec government rejects as a political policy, actively supports diversity as a source of collective strength and shared identity. This is an unfinished project that needs encouragement and support through education and policies aimed at inclusion.

In fact, new waves of migration to Quebec will lead to even greater diversity, changing the nature of our culture and community. We need to respond to this inevitable process of culture change by dialogue rather than political repression, promoting a vision of pluralism rather than ethnic nationalism. Far from leading to divisiveness, dialogue and engagement with others, learning about their traditions and living together, can strengthen the social fabric so that we all benefit from the rich tapestry of diversity. Respecting each other — not simply for our common humanity but precisely for our uniqueness — is the way to build a strong and creative society.

(signed)

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